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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 SHANGHAI 000097

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/CM, INR/EAP, AND DRL
NSC FOR LOI, KUCHTA-HELBLING

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [ELAB](#) [CH](#) [UN](#)

SUBJECT: LINCOLN TOUCHES A CHINESE NERVE - CHARTER 08 A SENSITIVE
ISSUE IN EAST CHINA

REF: A. (A) BEIJING 303
1B. (B) SHANGHAI 67
1C. (C) 08 SHANGHAI 547
1D. (D) 08 SHANGHAI 542
1E. (E) 08 SHANGHAI 523
1F. (F) BEIJING 400
1G. (G) SHANGHAI 50
1H. (H) SHANGHAI 39

CLASSIFIED BY: Beatrice A. Camp, Consul General, U.S. Consulate
General Shanghai, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (C) Official sensitivity to human rights issues, particularly the Charter 08 pro-democracy manifesto, revealed itself in heavy-handed interference in a Consulate reception February 11 commemorating the 200th birthday of Abraham Lincoln. Local officials notified universities and other institutions in Shanghai that their representatives should not participate in the event, to which six Charter 08 signatories were invited. Several contacts noted that officials are nervous about the year ahead, which is filled with sensitive dates, including the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen. End Summary.

Growing Sensitivity to Charter 08

2. (C) Expressing views similar to those of Beijing-based activists reported in ref A, east China contacts believe that the Charter 08 pro-democracy manifesto made public in December constitutes a budding "movement" that worries China's leaders. While Charter 08 signatories in Shanghai and Hangzhou acknowledge that the Charter's impact has not been as significant as they originally hoped (ref B), they also see official government concern about the Charter growing. (Note: According to the original posted list of 303 leading intellectuals and activists who signed the Charter, 47 of the signatories are from east China, with 26 in Shanghai, 17 in Zhejiang Province, three in Anhui Province, and one in Nanjing, Jiangsu's provincial capital. See also refs C, D, and E.) An indication of official concern about the Charter was the government's ham-fisted reaction to a February 11 Consulate commemoration of President Lincoln's 200th birthday, to which six Charter 08 signatories were invited. The six signatories,

all of whom are professors or writers and are long-term Consulate contacts, were among more than 50 invited Chinese guests to a diplomatic reception in honor of President Lincoln.

Misunderstanding on Lincoln Reception in Shanghai...

13. (C) The Consulate invitation to a reception "in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of President Lincoln" inexplicably prompted strong official protests in Shanghai and Beijing under the expressed (mistaken) belief that the event would be a "human rights seminar." Li Mingjun, Director General of the Shanghai Municipal Foreign Affairs Office, asked to meet the Consul General on February 10 to complain that the Consulate's event planned for the evening of February 11 would include invitees who are "so-called human rights activists and so-called democratic movement activists." Reading from notes, he said the Chinese Government "hopes the Consulate General will refrain from activities that interfere in the internal affairs of China or harm our friendly bilateral relations."

14. (C) The Consul General responded that the Consulate's February 11 reception, with birthday cake and apple pie, would celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of President Lincoln. The Consul General expressed concern that the Shanghai FAO would object to a normal diplomatic function to which more than 50 long-term Consulate contacts from the academic and literary communities had been invited.

...and at Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing

15. (C) The Consul General's meeting with Director General Li was

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preceded by a telephone call earlier in the day from Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Acting Director General for North American and Oceanian Affairs Deng Hongbo to the Charge in Beijing. Deng told the Charge he had called to discuss an "urgent and serious" topic connected with "activities to be undertaken by the Consulate General in Shanghai related to human rights." Reading a stridently-worded message in a businesslike manner, Deng objected to what he called the Consulate's plans to hold a "seminar for human rights activists." China opposed this "interference in internal affairs," which, according to Deng, was intended to "disrupt the legal process in Liu Xiaobo's case." Citing the Vienna Convention and the U.S.-China Consular Convention, Deng said China took the alleged "seminar" as a "serious action interfering in China's internal affairs."

16. (C) The Charge told Deng he had been misinformed; the Consulate was not planning a "seminar" for "human rights defenders." The Charge stated that the reception was a routine diplomatic event with a guest list drawn primarily from Shanghai-area universities and think tanks. The Charge told Deng that the Consulate would move forward with the low-key event. Deng objected, warning that the United States would "bear the consequences of any negative fallout" from the "seminar."

The Guests Who Signed the Charter

17. (C) The six invited Charter 08 signatories were Tongji University professors Zhang Hong and Wang Xiaoyu, Shanghai-based playwright Sha Yexin, Zhejiang University law professor Zhuang Daohe, and Hangzhou-based independent writers Wen Kejian and Zan Aizong. PolOff had previously met the six signatories on numerous occasions (refs B, C, D, and E) since the Charter was posted on-line on December 9. Sha Yexin had attended a Consulate lunch in honor of former President Carter on January 16. (Note: All six of the signatories are long-term Consulate contacts who, to our knowledge, are not under investigation nor have broken any Chinese laws. PolOff previously has met with two other Charter signatories in Hangzhou.)

¶8. (C) Although the reception proceeded as scheduled on February 11, only 10 of the 26 Chinese guests who previously had RSVP'ed their intent to participate attended the reception. Several invited guests, including professors from Tongji University and Fudan University, a representative of the Shanghai YMCA, and a Shanghai Municipal People's Congress delegate, all informed the Consulate in advance of the event that they had been asked not to attend. Two Tongji University professors and a well-known American Studies scholar attended the reception despite being told by their higher-ups not to.

¶9. (C) None of the six Charter signatories on the guest list attended the event. The three Hangzhou-based signatories who had planned to travel to Shanghai on February 11 were detained for approximately eight hours in Hangzhou and prevented from traveling. According to Wen Kejian, the Lincoln reception was not specifically mentioned during questioning, but he suspected that he and his colleagues were detained to prevent them from attending. They were released at approximately 7:30 p.m. In Shanghai, Zhang Hong and Wang Xiaoyu told PolOff on February 10 they would not be able to attend based on the "misunderstanding that the Consulate is hosting a reception related to Charter 08," according to Wang's e-mail.

¶10. (C) The reception opened as planned with a 15-minute program that combined video clips from a biography of Lincoln with brief remarks by the Consul General quoting from Lincoln's speeches and President Obama's inaugural address. In her remarks, the CG noted that many Chinese were familiar with the Gettysburg Address and related how then-President Jiang Zemin had recited a passage from memory in English during a 1997 visit to the White House. Shanghai scholar Ding Xinghao later approached the Consul General to tell her of a similar recitation by Jiang in 1986 when he served as Shanghai Municipal Party Secretary. After the brief program, guests sampled Kentucky burgoo and homemade apple pie, in several cases talking freely about their reaction to the events that led to the sparse attendance.

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Information resource materials, including a Chinese translation of the IIP Bureau pamphlet on President Obama and ads for the Consulate's weekly movie night, were all gone by the end of the evening. Departing guests were also presented with a Lincoln penny and a brief history of the coin.

Guests Cite Shanghai's Conservatism

¶11. (C) One contact who participated in the reception blamed the official overreaction on Shanghai's cautious political disposition. Gu Su, a professor of philosophy and law at Nanjing University, told PolOff that Shanghai remains ultra-cautious politically despite the appearance of a city that is the most economically open in China. Gu said the reception would not have attracted attention in Nanjing, but Shanghai authorities are skittish about human rights issues. Still, Gu said, the government's overreaction to the Lincoln event seemed unusual, and perhaps illustrated the government's high level of concern about potential social instability in 2009.

Political Officers Can Pack It in

¶12. (C) Other attendees stated that government officials are extremely nervous about the year ahead, which is filled with sensitive dates, including the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen. Zhang Nian, a professor at Tongji University who attended the reception despite being told by university officials not to, told PolOff that the government's nervousness about 2009 is "extreme" and "ridiculous." She pointed to the upcoming 20th anniversary of Tiananmen (June 4) and the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (October 1) as two reasons why the government is more concerned about political

issues, particularly in a major economic downturn (ref F).
"This year is so sensitive," Zhang said, "if you are a Political Officer for the U.S. Embassy or Consulate, you might as well take a long break because the Chinese Government is not going to let you do anything."

Touching a Nerve: Link to Social Stability Concerns?

¶13. (C) East China-based observers say that official sensitivity to Charter 08 is directly related to concerns that disenchanted intellectuals or students might "team up" with unemployed migrant workers to foment social instability. Dong Baohua, a law professor at East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai, told PolOff on February 17 that the government is increasingly concerned about intellectuals motivating workers to protest. Dong estimated that the number of unemployed migrant workers is at least twice the official number of 20 million, that east China authorities are gravely concerned about the impact of unemployment on social stability, and that the authorities are therefore keeping a closer eye on what intellectuals say and do.

¶14. (C) Gu Su previously told PolOff on January 21 that there had been much discussion in the academic community recently about the possibility of unhappy university graduates "who can write" inspiring large numbers of migrant workers to protest (ref G). Underscoring the importance of keeping university graduates happy, Shanghai Municipal Party Secretary Yu Zhengsheng told the Consul General on January 16 that the most important issue of Shanghai's "Two Meetings," the annual plenary sessions of the Shanghai Municipal People's Congress (SMPC) and Shanghai Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) held in mid-January, had been the employment situation and finding jobs for university graduates (ref H)

Comment

¶15. (C) The Consulate's commemoration of Lincoln's 200th birthday touched a nerve with government officials both in Beijing and Shanghai, most likely because of the inclusion of Charter 08 signatories on the guest list. The official overreaction to a normal diplomatic activity revealed sensitivity to the Charter. We were struck by the complete misunderstanding on the part of our local government

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interlocutors about the intention of the Lincoln event -- a diplomatic function for a wide range of Chinese scholars to celebrate an iconic American leader admired by Chinese leaders -- and their unwillingness to back down, even calling institutions to pass the word that their representatives should not attend the event.

¶16. (C) Regardless of the reasons for the reaction, we believe the Chinese once again were their own worst enemies, giving the guests who attended the reception the incentive to discuss with American diplomats how the Chinese Government handles perceived dissent. At the same time, we expect that all of our invitees, including the Charter 08 signatories who were prevented from attending, received the message that the Consulate supports government of, for, and by the people, as well as their efforts to promote free expression and exercise their rights in China.

¶17. (U) This report was cleared by Embassy Beijing.
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